

Book 18 - Questions and Answers

Silence.

I haven't felt such utter stillness in quite a long time. In its midst, the voice of the one who proclaims itself master of this space is clearly heard.

It shimmers as if smothered in light.

"Who are you?"

Only after I forced those words out did I realize that it was a pointless question.

There's no one left in this City who calls me "Ver" anymore. I suddenly remembered that when I last heard such a moniker, my eyes were not as they are now.

I wonder, then, if the world as my eyes captured it back then was greener than it is now.

"Who I am isn't very important, Ver. Let's just have a little talk."

All that spreads before my eyes is a warm and comforting light.

It's as if all the Light and color that was boundlessly scattered throughout the City came to life, evoking the imprudent illusion that all fault is being washed away just by being here.

Then, a visage invariably came to mind. One of salvation, yet which I vividly felt shouldn't be embraced carelessly.

"As such, we are each other's guests. Just as I have something I want to ask you, you have something you want to ask me."

While I was on the City's surface, I held numerous unanswered questions. Questions no one could answer or simply wouldn't acknowledge.

Therefore, I decided to reply to this voice.

"Your heart looks to be aching. The children you couldn't save are swirling around in your head, aren't they?"

"....."

Replying was unnecessary, it seems.

"They were quite the innocent children."

There was no sentimentality in that sentence, neither pity nor regret. Perhaps this being knows what happened to transform those children.

"The children that underwent the experiment..."

"It's too late. The way back is gone. That clear ignorance of the world made the children rather burdensome."

The merry voice mercilessly strikes down my question.

To tell the truth, I had a vague estimate of that fact. That's not to say that I didn't hope to be wrong.

"Ah... I think I heard your heart break."

My heart made no such sound. However, only after the voice said so did I notice I was quietly cracking apart.

"But to have become like this... The children didn't deserve this."

Then the warm yet unfeeling voice clasped me as if in a hug.

"But, you know, Ver? Everything that's happened so far isn't your fault."

Fleeting syllables rang out akin to the singing of a song, sounding like a consolation whose sole intent was to absolve me of sin. If I were to listen a little longer... I felt I would surrender myself to this pleasant voice despite my will.

"No, that... isn't something someone can freely measure."

As its words revealed themselves one by one, they were always tightly intertwined. By the time I came to my senses, I was grasping a great lump of guilt in my hands, nothing discernible within.

So I...

Held a part of the City in me as well.

"Ver, consider this. The orphanage's children have turned into something that is no longer themselves... And even the young Fixer who wished to help you has entered into a cocoon. The situation may look grave, but compared to everything you've done, it's really just a minor incident."

"....."

"And yet, why does it hurt you more than anything?"

The voice saw through my facade. It viewed the life I was living, never properly opening up to anyone. It observed all the roads I followed, even from the times when my pupils held no blood.

I began to recall all those paths.

The people wailing, begging for salvation, some buried before even being able to scream, the collapsing buildings, and...

All the lives whose blood was shed.

However, as a matter of fact, there existed a warm expanse of light, the complete opposite of everything that came before. It surely was the light I created for myself. Where they waited for me. Where voices of delight and excitement were heard instead of wailing and yelling.

"I see, the orphanage was your hope."

The voice found its answer.

"You have always considered the City to be wounded. But the stains on your hands won't be washed away, and you'll continue to be the one to keep the blood flowing through the City from drying out."

Yes, the foul-smelling wounds of the City run deep... for they have been festering for a long while.

"I knew how to cure this City, but the road to achieving that goal was so cruel that we would have to spill more blood than was already spilled. You, awkward and kind as you are, have buried that road deep within your heart."

...But there exists a method to make this road much gentler.

"So you found it."

Without having to dirty my hands yet...

"Children who may be able to change the City in your place."

The orphanage was my very own limbo, my place of redemption. Despite never having informed them of my sins, by stirring up a virtuous attitude within me to the same heights, my frozen heart melted like snow.

"Sprinkling water and fertilizer in your spare time... Making sure the sunlight properly comes in, and there are no insects to bite them."

The voice spoke as if it were doing so itself.

"You looked after them. You, who had lived your life following only strong flows, had your eyes only on the potential of what was a feeble flow at best."

"Yes. As you say, I wanted to plant seeds that, even if feeble, had potential."

They were hidden in a remote corner where nary a ray of sunshine reached. However, just because something is unseen does not mean it's incomplete. Thus, I looked after them, like growing a tree.

"I wanted them to live on my behalf. If I could get them to live with the heart I couldn't have, I was sure that even the faintest flow would grow into the sturdiest."

However.

Did I really think the orphanage could change the City?

"No... Ver, you knew it couldn't. The children were just pieces of paper to wipe off the blood from your hands. Indulgences you yourself printed. But now, they have all been ripped apart..."

Its tone changed to what I believe was meant to be sympathetic. But it simultaneously became foreboding as well.

"Because of that, your countless sins flooded in... And so, your heart was bound to crack. However, thanks to that, we were able to meet and talk like this."

Since when did I begin to experience that feeling called guilt?

Since when did I lose the place where I could let my head down? No longer do I have the strength to move. Only now do I realize that this life of playing house may have been my final struggle to protect my soul, to stop the guilt from consuming me.

Because I know that the place I'm bound for will be too much for me.

"But, let me tell you something, Ver. This is the place where you can speak your mind freely. So... can you let me hear it all?"

My heart has cracked. And from that little crack, the voice saw everything. Even the blade that was hidden inside me for so long yet never stopped sharpening.

That blade, buried deep in my heart, was revealed for the first time through the crack, both to me and the voice.

We both knew what it was.

"What you really wanted... It wasn't just playing house at the orphanage. All you want is..."

"You... did everything for ██████████."

"...!"

Indeed, I ██████████ all over again...

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The shell of the City is quite sturdy. No matter how much blood is shed to push through it, it won't be enough to reach the City's wounds, hidden in the most secluded of places. I, who tried to pierce into the wounded core of the City, should know this fact best.

"Such was your ambition, but as you continued to atone for nothing in your visits to the orphanage, it was gradually buried. To the point that not even a trace of it remains."

No, even if it became buried, it never lost its luster. That poignant wish could still cut down all ██████████ of ██████████ at a moment's notice.

However, whenever such thoughts surfaced, I'd merely suppress them back to the recesses of my mind.

"But burying it is just as painful. That wish is too sharp, it leaves injuries that deny your heart the time to heal."

The voice recited agony as if it had been hurt itself.

"It must have been so difficult, lonesome, suffocating to have such a lofty dream... But you don't have to hide it anymore. Because everyone can create by themselves a world they consider right."

"A world for myself... What are you talking about?"

"A world only for your eyes to see, exactly that. I'm helping everyone paint their own colors on the City."

"Everybody's own world, huh? However, each person's color is different, they could never be nicely painted together."

If such a method existed, I would have done it before anyone else.

"Indeed, as you said, the colors blend together in the Light. Therefore, one must devote all of themselves to painting and protecting one's color. Even if a laborious ordeal comes their way. Nevertheless, they must readily fight and overcome it to secure their place. Even if they must fight the entire world."

I wanted to break the shell of the City, fight and stand up to everything that interfered with my path, tear it all down and eventually create a new world.

"What do you mean by ordeal?"

If there is such a way, if it's just.
Then, I'd like to follow it.

"For instance, what that child is undergoing, or what those children experienced in this laboratory before their alteration. When you become aware of this unbearable world, you'll burrow into the inside of your egg to separate and establish your [REDACTED]."

I recalled Garnet, who had become a red jewel.

"What happens once you enter that egg?"

"Well, you can break out of the egg, or you can be seized by sin and be eaten into nothing but residues."

The voice innocently spoke.

"No one can know the outcome. You'll have to set [REDACTED] from within the egg to emerge from it. If you're unable to endure the process, what will burst out will be your sin-eaten remnants."

"Is that different from Distorting?"

"Jumsoon is certainly a Distortion, as the world calls it... But the children of the laboratory have only become a reflection of their sins."

A reflection of sin... The cries of the things that crawled along the floor ring inside my head.

"However, isn't that strange? Since when did it become like that...? I thought Distorting referred to the phenomenon of people revealing their colors by transforming into a reflection of their egos."

The Distortion phenomenon emerged after the Light spread throughout the City. They are aberrant beings that made the City bleed, wounding even those who gather blood. The voice began to speak in an abnormally positive manner.

"You think so, too? But, aren't they 'twisted, broken, perverse figures'?"

"...It's certainly not a normal form to take."

"Normal... To them, they are normal while the world is the abnormal one. But more importantly, they have come to cherish themselves and see the world through their own eyes."

The voice spoke in a dreamlike melody.
However, it was dreamlike to such an extent...
That even their words seemed like a dream.

"It is to become a self unbound by the eyes and standards of the City. However, the resulting form changes depending on the way it was revealed. ...Thanks to my junior, who has a different idea than me, joining the Light."

The word "junior" being insignificantly introduced and disregarded bothered me. It was spoken with a light and calm tone, but I feel as if it was involved in every cause and effect.

"...How do you know all this?"

Unwelcome premonitions begin to gather as one.

"Are you the person responsible for this phenomenon?"

"Correct, but I'm also a friend that wishes to help you make your color bloom."

"It must be really important for you to make colors bloom in people."

"Ver, do you know... where you're heading now?"

I couldn't reply. It's been a long time since I turned my eyes away from my destination, vacantly standing still.

...It's been a long time since I hid my gaze.

"I, well, have been curious about that for quite a while. Where is everyone going? Mhm, it's clear that they're repeatedly trying to go somewhere, at least... But what kind of place could cause the emergence of such ambition again and again...?"

As long as time flows, people will try to go anywhere they want to.
It's a matter of course.

"These are only my thoughts, but I think people are seeking love."

Love?

The word I'm unaccustomed to bothered me.

"Love is thought to be the emotion of valuing another above all else, but... I think every act done with the thought of loving another is nothing but part of the process of loving oneself."

"Are you trying to spark a debate regarding that?"

No, you just have to listen. The voice said, as if lightly tossing the words, then continued its monologue.

"Because, in the end, the only person in the world who can completely see and understand who they are is themselves... They cannot truly comprehend or love a person who isn't themselves. As such, loving oneself is the only true final destination."

"If what you say is true... Are you saying we shouldn't look at anything other than ourselves?"

"...You ask the same question as my junior. We must struggle, but as human beings, we should use reason, not emotion..."

The voice adjusted itself.

"So, he said, we have to fight in the most human way possible, through clothing and tools, while holding the human form in high regard."

"....."

"But that only pollutes the results. You don't need moderation when revealing yourself. After all, if you go through something without properly reaching its conclusion and keep going in such a roundabout way, your wish will become diluted and be forgotten all over again."

"...Like with the present-day people of the City?"

"Exactly. Moreover, if the tools made from my heart are broken, wouldn't my heart break in turn? That is to say, we should express our love solely with our own bodies. Your whole body and your heart collide with each other... and you come to love yourself."

"So I should disregard... everything that isn't me?"

"That's right."

"...Have you always been this way, driving those trying to reawaken down another path?"

"I simply ask questions others have never given thought to. And usually, we understand each other. I support and lend them strength, so they can continue on their new path."

A friendly yet ruthless pressure.

Don't look at anything but yourself, and be buried in self-love.

It says it will give me the power to do so.

The back of my neck grew warm.

Has anyone ever presented such a pleasant solution up to now?

In this City, where individuals are insignificant, I'm allowed to look only at 'me' and ignore everything else...?

It was so radiant that I wanted to close my eyes, even in their present state.

However.

"As you say... I'm sure I'd be satisfied if I accepted. I'd feel fulfilled and content. It'd be a satisfaction that I've never experienced before."

But.

"It'd be nothing more than a momentary pleasure. Even if you tried to paint the world to the brim, like that Distortion filled with dots, for immediate gratification, you'd never be able to paint it all with such a method."

It would be a thirst that couldn't ever be satisfied.

"Then... Wouldn't Distorting only prevent you from looking an inch ahead of yourself?"

"...It could be. Still, that interpretation is your idea and color, is it not? As for me, I have my own color, and others have their own color as well. I simply inform them of one more path."

"How cowardly."

"Ver, doesn't imposing the standards of right or wrong and judging me make you the same as one of the many City dwellers you thought wounded?"

"...Now my eyes have been opened."

Obviously, there was something to be gained from the conversation with the voice.
The blade that once was hidden in my heart was revealed, and I rediscovered where it was pointing and what I needed to confront.
But that path can only be followed when all the beauty and ugliness of the world is held in my gaze.
...Even if it weighs down on my surroundings.

"There's no point in continuing this conversation."

"Was my proposal not to your liking?"

The voice seemed to be quite disappointed.

"You appear to be the cause behind all the Distortions. I have no real way of knowing who you are, however... What do you hope to achieve with all this whispering and background manipulation?"

"As I told you, I believe everyone should fight the world in order to paint their own colors. And I'm a person, too. Shouldn't I [redacted] my [redacted] the [redacted]? If someone is unable to be who they truly are even after I lend them the power to do so, [redacted] my [redacted] to paint the world with the colors [redacted]."

When I heard its answer, I closed my eyes.

"So, once all is said and done, [redacted]... In the flow of [redacted] and [redacted] in all [redacted], [redacted] will be [redacted]."

Ah...

An unprovoked smile emerged on my lips. I was laughing.

A world where you, as if a starving beast, must struggle against everything in your endless thirst to build your own world.

If I went down the path the voice told me, it would surely be pleasurable, but it wouldn't get me to where I want to go.

Thus, I have only one way to go.

To tread with all the pain and thirst I have experienced until now and will suffer through again in the future...

Because only I can do it.

"It seems we're going to take opposite paths."

"Yes, then go your own way. It, too, must be the color of the person you are."

And so.

I wear a crown of thorns upon my head, so that I may shoulder everything until my future victory.

Faded laurel leaves sprout to cover all of the thorns on my head, and tears of blood flow from my eyes so I may see all the sins I'll have to bear from now on.



And the thorny path I shall travel is a curtain of blood containing my karma, a crimson cloth that covers my whole being.



I'm dragged down into a pit.
Within are many cries, everybody's agony, surging together.
The pit is profound and dark, making it difficult to look ahead.
But I will take hold of it and triumph.



As I engrave everything into these eyes.

Hence.

I will present to the world the longed-for paradise I promised an old friend.

I,

I will fall into a hell of my karma and rest there, alone.



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